

Deconstructing love in the context of sexual abuse

by Sue Mann¹

This reflection explores the complex realm of the experiences of women who were subjected to sexual abuse as children. Many of the circumstances of childhood sexual abuse can contribute to considerable confusion about understandings and experiences of love, as abuse often occurs in contexts which are described as loving. In some circumstances the person who has abused has, on occasions, also been loving to the child. This short piece offers some reflections on options for therapists in responding to women in these circumstances.

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Recently another therapist consulted with me in relation to her work with a young woman who she was meeting with around the effects of childhood sexual abuse. They had come to an impasse in the work. The young woman was feeling like there was much to be grateful for from the person who had abused her – he had taught her to sing; he had taken an interest in her studies that had led to her having an education that otherwise might not have been available to her; he had fostered her learning which she was very excited about; and yet he had also been sexually abusing her throughout this time. The questions that the young woman found herself asking were: ‘How can someone be so lovely and so bad at the same time? How can people who love you, hurt you at the same time?’ This left her with the belief that if he was clearly so loving, ‘therefore I must be the bad person’.

These questions did not come as a surprise to me. I often hear from women that the person who has abused them has also been ‘loving’ or ‘gentle’ or ‘kind’ and that this has created considerable confusion for them. Sometimes the other relationships in the child’s life have been violent and abusive in ways that have them view the sexual abuse as not as bad as the other forms of abuse they were subjected to. Women have told me how the person who abused them told them how much they ‘loved them’. I have also heard of many times when the adult who perpetrated the abuse spoke of how

important the child’s ‘love’ was to them in return, that they were ‘vulnerable’ and ‘needed’ the ‘love’ of the child.

As therapists, how can we respond to these situations? In one respect, this is straightforward. In contexts of sexual abuse ‘love’ is often used by an adult as a practice of power to take advantage of a child’s less developed skills in solving problems and making distinctions around what is and isn’t loving. This confusing of love and abuse can at times be a deliberate tactic/strategy to ensure compliance of the child, and to have the child believing that they have been complicit in the abuse. Attention and care can be taken to ‘groom’ and prepare a child to make it more difficult for them to resist or say no because of the specialness of the relationship and the things that would be lost to them if they refused. In these ways, the child’s trust in adults is taken advantage of.

When I hear women speak of their confusion about the loving ways that were demonstrated by the adult who abused them, I think of all these things. At these times I have toyed with the idea of perhaps giving a small talk on ‘the tactics of people who abuse’, or a brief discussion of ‘what is love’. And yet, when I have done so in the past, I have noticed that this doesn’t necessarily offer relief to the woman concerned from the confusion, doubt or feelings of culpability. When I make statements or judgements about the meaning of the adult’s actions, somehow it feels to me like this doesn’t honour the

complexity of what the child has been expected to manage and make sense of. It also doesn't seem to acknowledge the complexity of the ongoing effects of this for them as adults.

So what supports me in these moments and what ways have I found to go forward? What most supports me in these conversations is to step outside the idea that the adult, or the relationship in question, had to be either loving or abusive, and instead to think and talk about acts of love, and acts of abuse. I want to provide opportunities for the women with whom I work to identify the acts of love that have been significant to them in their lives, and why these have been significant, and to separate these from acts of abuse which have had quite different effects.

Sometimes it has been helpful to simply start with acknowledging confusion and all that it can mean. Acknowledging confusion around the question of love can offer an entry point to conversations that bring forward what is valued by the woman. When women express confusion about considerations of love, and a wish to clarify their understandings about this, we can explore what this means to them, why this is important to them, and what this says about them. This can make space for stories of the ways that love has been acted out in the woman's own life, the acts of love that they have demonstrated towards others. Once we have explored why love is significant to them, the values that they hold dear, we can examine how these values may have been violated by the abuse. In circumstances where the woman has been feeling as if she is 'the bad person', confusion may also be a testimony to resisting these ideas. By unpacking confusion we may find opportunities to revise ideas about responsibility for the abuse.

In time, we might also work together to identify the history of the woman's skills in discerning acts of love from acts of disrespect or abuse. Tracing the history of these skills can lead to a richer description and appreciation of them. In turn this can often enable the woman to further develop these skills in their current life and relationships.

As well, I am curious about how love came to be named in the relationship with the person who acted abusively towards them: 'Who called this relationship one of love? Were there times when it could be called loving and times when it could be called something else? What would they have wanted to call it if they had been asked? What would they want to call it now?'

An important theme to these conversations involves assisting the woman to move away from 'feeling like the bad

person'. When women can reconsider what love would have looked like, if it had been there in the place of abuse, it can make a significant difference: 'He would have just taught me to ride horses and told me how good I was at that and not made me feel frightened'; 'He would have gone to a therapist – like I have – instead of expecting me as a child to look after him'.

When these sorts of clarifications can be made, I often hear the woman developing a clear expectation of apology from the person who has abused and sometimes a sense of sadness for the person.

For people who have been subjected to sexual abuse as children, the question of love can be complex. Sometimes a woman with whom I work may have once thought the relationship they had with a particular adult was loving, and yet now they understand it to be a completely abusive relationship. Other times, a woman might want to acknowledge the abuse that they experienced and all the effects of this, while also holding onto in some way the acts of care they experienced from this particular adult as separate from the acts of abuse. Other times, a woman might simply speak of her confusion about these issues.

In my work, I try to remain open to the particular woman's wishes and knowledges and to explore the discernments that she is making in these realms. I also try to carefully enquire as to the effects of each conversation that we share around these issues.

I continue to learn a lot from the women with whom I work about acts of abuse and about acts of love.

Note

1. Sue Mann has worked in Adelaide in the area of childhood sexual abuse for the last four and a half years. She is also a member of the Dulwich Centre teaching faculty and can be contacted c/o Dulwich Centre.

Suggested further reading

- Herman, J. 1992: *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic violence to political terror*. New York: Basic Books.
- Jenkins, A., Joy, M. & Hall, R. 2003: 'Forgiveness and child sexual abuse: A matrix of meanings' (chapter 2) in *Responding to Violence: A collection of papers relating to child sexual abuse and violence in intimate relationships*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Verco, J. 2003: 'Women's outrage and the pressure to forgive' (chapter 6) in *Responding to Violence: A collection of papers relating to child sexual abuse and violence in intimate relationships*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.